

REVIEW: *SMUG PA*

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Tshe ring don grub ཚེ་རིང་དོན་གྲུབ།. 2002. *Smug pa [Fog]*. Zi ling mi rigs dpe skrun khang རི་ལིང་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱུར་ཁང་། [Zi ling Nationalities Press].¹ Distributed by Hong Kong Qilin Press. 208pp. ISBN 962-950-109-1/D.99009 (paper cover 10RMB).

Tshe ring don grub was born in 1961 in Sog rdzong (Henan) Mongolian Autonomous County of Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. Though he is classified as Mongolian, his mother tongue is A mdo Tibetan. *Smug pa* is his second novel, the first being *Mes po 'Ancestor'*, which was published in 2001. He also authored *Rlung dmar 'ur 'ur 'The Red Wind Screams'* (2009).

Fog begins with the protagonist, Seng ge, disappointed by a publisher's rejection of his novel, *Tears of the Wild Yak*. Seng ge, once a teacher at Rtse Area Nationality Middle School, shares with his colleagues, Red-Eyed Scholar (nickname) and Bde mchog, an interest in Tibetan literature and reading.

Me tog, Seng ge's wife, is contemptuous of "backward" nomads and their culture. She speaks Chinese whenever she can (dialogue between Me tog and Seng ge is presented in Chinese characters, followed by Tibetan translation). They are an odd couple as Seng ge was not only born into a herder's family, but he also has a fervent passion for Tibetan literature which leads him to become a writer.

One day, two young foreign women - an American, Jo'u tis 'Judy', and a Japanese, me'u ya rdza khe'u yo kho 'Yoko' - arrive to research Tibetan literature. Judy studies Tibetan at the provincial

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¹ Although "Zi ling Nationalities Press" is listed as the publisher, I assume the book was printed by Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Nationalities Press.

nationalities university. In time, she not only translates *Tears of the Wild Yak* into English, but also publishes it in the USA, where it is recognized as one of the one hundred most outstanding novels of the world in the twentieth century, highlighting the irony of the book's rejection by a China publisher.

Judy is fascinated by the book and visits Rtse to see and experience the novel's setting first hand. She also provides 2,000 USD for the publication of the book in Tibetan.

Judy's visits to the Rtse area deepen her relationship with Seng ge. One day, she sits on a meadow by the banks of the Rtse River, facing a sky turned orange by the setting sun. The diminishing sunbeams illuminate her blond hair, rendering her a Greek goddess with a beauty and allure that mesmerizes Seng ge. No longer able to endure the mantle of etiquette, Seng ge kisses her. They are physically intimate on the river bank, a relationship that continues.

When Me tog learns of this development, she is disturbed by her husband's relationship with, in her terms, the "foreign whore"/"American stooge." She also takes to referring to Seng ge as a "henchman of American Imperialism."

One day, she quarrels with Seng ge and slams Judy's expensive camera to the ground. On another occasion, she pulls Judy's hair in a catfight. This behavior further separates Seng ge and Me tog, who are soon in a relationship that is beyond recovery. Seng ge then decides to leave that disturbed, foggy environment and search for a better life with Judy in America.

Judy, however, is not the cause of this failed marriage. Profound differences separate Me tog and Seng ge in many aspects of life and it clear that they should never have married. When they were in middle school, Seng ge regularly challenged students from the Chinese language medium class (classes taught in the Chinese language), which include Me tog. He even made a tall paper hat with four Chinese characters reading "Down with Me tog" and marked it with a red X. Me tog's father, a government leader, then came to the school with several policemen, arrested Seng ge, and scolded and beat him.

Later, Seng ge and Me tog attend the provincial nationalities university where he studies Tibetan literature and she studies art. Me tog is attracted by Seng ge's outstanding academic performance and good looks. They fall in love and marry after graduation. However, their many differences create tension, which becomes more severe with the arrival of the "foreign whore," husband-stealing Judy.

Judy respects herders and their culture. Her ability to communicate in Tibetan is impressive. Her generosity and sympathy is illustrated when Seng ge reluctantly asks if he can use the 2,000 USD publishing grant to help pay for Bde mchog's girlfriend, Kun dga' sgrol ma, who is critically ill in hospital. Kun dga' sgrol ma's two brothers left for Lha sa and were never heard of again, and she has no parents.

Kun dga' sgrol ma dreamed of working in the city and trusted Longneck (nickname) who often brings rural girls to the city with the promise of jobs and prosperity. What little hesitation she had left was allayed after a positive divination by 'Brong Rin po che. Bde mchog then gave 10,000 RMB from his savings to Longneck so that he can ostensibly bribe leaders to secure a job for Kun dga' sgrol ma in the city.

Predictably, Kun dga' sgrol ma ends up in a city nightclub, offering "special services" to officials. She becomes very ill and cannot afford to pay her medical expenses. Kun dga' sgrol ma, expecting Me tog to visit her, instead sees Judy. Seng ge and Judy keep watch by her hospital bed until Kun dga' sgrol ma draws her last breath.

Seng ge prepares for his departure for America. He donates his book collection to the county culture center and he and Judy visit his family to say good-bye. Judy enjoys the time with this herding family. During their visit, they notice two security personnel tailing them - one Han and the other Tibetan. Seng ge recognizes these two as the same men who shamelessly watched through the glass panels above the door of a room where he and Judy were having sex.

Finally, Seng ge and Judy fly to Beijing National Airport. Will they make a success of their attempt to start a new life? Readers will find the answer at the end of the novel.

This work does not specify the place and time of the story. The author finished this novel in 1999, however, it is clear the setting is the

1990s as this part of China is perched on the edge of unprecedented socio-economic changes.

This novel illustrates educated Tibetans' lives and loves in the contemporary socio-political context. Having earned a government job and with basic survival no longer an issue, the protagonists thus find meaning in life by writing and discussing literature. This typified the behavior of elites in China prior to the time a market-driven economy had taken root. Consequently, Seng ge and his colleagues come across as idealistic and naïve at times.

Many book titles and authors' names from both China and abroad are sprinkled in the novel's dialogues, helping to further create a realistic social environment that educated Tibetans lived in. A book-centered life and idealism had not yet been buried by the prevailing system of corruption.

Seng ge's group yearned to reform the malfunctioning school system and proposed relevant reform policies to the county government. This proposal is eventually approved with assistance from their friend, the smooth operator, Tshul khirms, who is put in charge of the school. New school policies dramatically improve students' performance. However, a local restaurant owner produces a detailed list of expenditures for food and liquor with Tshul khirms' signature and requests payment. Seng ge and Bde mchog then look for other jobs to avoid involvement. And later, when Tshul khirms gives 10,000 *yuan* to Seng ge before his trip to the USA, Seng ge is infuriated, assuming the money is tainted.

Rtse county town is often enveloped in thick fog due to the summer weather and air pollution from a factory in the town. The lack of clarity caused by the weather in combination with industrial pollution creates air and water pollution in a once-pristine pastureland that was home to both herders and wildlife. Seng ge dislikes foggy summer days and cold, windy winter days. These predicaments mirror Seng ge's personal crises, e.g., the uncertainty of his marriage and the murky reasons behind his novel's rejection.

The author also satirizes those who blindly follow *bla ma*. 'Brong Rin po che's advice to Kun dga' sgröl ma results in a tragic

ending. Furthermore, the same *bla ma* does a divination regarding the suitability of Red-Eyed Scholar marrying his girlfriend. The result is that Red-Eyed Scholar does not marry her and becomes depressed, drinks, and gambles, and ruins his life.

An uneasy cultural intertwining between herders and the dominant Han is a theme that the author alludes to through dialogue and episodes. Me tog is a model citizen created by the education system. Though a proletarian, revolutionary, and Party member, her father cannot speak fluent Tibetan as illustrated in his speech in broken Tibetan mimicking Chinese intonation in bureaucratic tones.

Me tog's behavior when she is in a rage reminds readers of typical angry Han women performing in TV dramas, screaming and stomping the floor to express their anger and frustration. Me tog not only deems nomadic culture to be backward, but is disgusted by the smell of one of Seng ge's guests, which ignites Seng ge's hot temper.

The author highlights intimacy between Seng ge and Judy by using *nga'i snying sdug* 'dear' and *gces phrug* 'baby'. He also frequently uses such terms as "see you," "good-bye," and "absurd." Seng ge is particularly fond of "absurd," which is presented in English followed by Tibetan translation.

Judy's religious beliefs are never clearly explained. Ostensibly, her Tibetan literature study and novel translation explain her presence in China. However, when children in Seng ge's extended family ask her to tell a story one night, she gives a Christian account of Creation. This may reflect the fact that at this time, many foreigners in Tibetan areas were Christian missionaries who were actively proselytizing.

Seng ge's affection for animals, the grassland, and nomadic culture are at odds with the corrupt socio-political system. For example, when the government mandates all those under the age of thirty participate in military drills in their work unit, Seng ge expresses dislike for anything related to the military. He recalls childhood memories of cruel soldiers and their unspeakable brutality towards small animals, e.g., setting fire to sparrows and tossing them into the air, or putting living frogs atop ant dens to be eaten alive.

When Seng ge asks permission to leave work to visit Kun dga' sgrol ma in the hospital, his leader disapproves on the grounds that a grassland conflict has erupted and the Party secretary has announced that leaves are not permitted. Seng ge angrily points out that this conflict has no relationship with his request for leave. He then accuses the leaders of hoping for such violent disputes over pastureland because they have nothing to do.

This difference between Seng ge and the "system" is accentuated by Me tog. She stands in opposition to his values and beliefs - who and what he is. In contrast, Seng ge finds common ground with Judy, who echoes his interests, including a love of nature and the culture of Tibet. Judy, an American, represents the West and its acceptance of differences, pro-environment conservation attitudes, and the value of preserving indigenous culture. Such notions are totally outside Me tog's universe.

Differences between Me tog and Judy might be found in answers to two questions: (1) What cultures do the two women represent? (2) What do the differences in their behavior imply? Answers to these questions help further explain this novel's social and political implications.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'brong rin po che འབྲོང་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།
 a mdo ཨ་མདོ།
 bde mchog བདེ་མཚན།
 bla ma བླ་མ།
 gces phrug གཅེས་ཕུག
 Henan 河南
 Huangnan 黄南
 jo'u tis ཇོ་འུ་ཏིས་
 kun dga' sgrol ma ཀུན་དགའ་སྒྲོལ་མ།
 lha sa ལྷ་ས།
 me tog མེ་ཏོག
 mes po མེས་པོ།
 me'u ya rdza ke'u yo ko/ me'u ya rdza khe'u yo kho མེ་འུ་ཡ་རྩ་ཀེ་འུ་ཧོ་ཀོ/ མེ་འུ་ཡ་རྩ་ཁེ་འུ་ཧོ་ཁོ མེ་འུ་ཡ་རྩ་ཀེ་འུ་ཧོ་ཀོ
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོན།
 nga'i snying sdug འུ་གེ་སྤྱིང་སྤུག
 Qinghai 青海
 Qilin 麒麟
 rlung dmar 'ur 'ur རླུང་དམར་འུ་ར་འུ་ར།
 rma lho རྩ་ལྷོ།
 rtse རྩེ།
 rtse khog རྩེ་ཁོག
 seng ge སེང་གེ།
 tshe ring don grub ཚེ་རིང་དོན་གུབ།
 tshul khirms ཚུལ་ཁིམས།
 zi ling mi rigs dpe skrun khang ཟི་ལིང་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐུན་ཁང་།